
KATE
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AND A PIGEON
IN A PEAR TREE

CHRISTMAS AT CASTLE KEYVNOR.

AND A PIGEON IN A PEAR TREE…

Kate Pearce

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Introduction

When stuffy Benjamin Priske, Baron Saxelby, heir to the Earl of Widcome arrives at Castle Keyvnor, he not only falls in love at first sight, but is accidentally mistaken for his valet. As he spends time with Henrietta, the witty, beautiful, and self-assured granddaughter of the castle housekeeper, he's increasingly reluctant to reveal his true identity and spoil the most remarkable days of his life. Can Benjamin overcome his rigid nature, embrace the magical nature of Keyvnor castle, and maybe indulge in a fairytale romance all of his own?

Note To Readers

Dear Reader,

This novella, *And A Pigeon In A Pear Tree…* was originally part of the Christmas At Castle Keyvnor collection, book 4 *Tempted At Christmas*. If you want the full experience of 12 interconnected stories then you might enjoy checking them out.

I hope you enjoy this magical Christmas story during the Holiday season.

If you'd like to keep up with my new releases and other author news, please feel free to join my newsletter.

Best wishes
Kate Pearce

Chapter 1

“Well, I can’t say I’m glad to see you, Henrietta, but I suppose you can stay.” Mrs. Bray, the housekeeper at Castle Keyvnor, put down her cup and pursed her thin lips. “The castle is fully occupied at the moment due to all these weddings, so I could do with an extra pair of hands.” She quickly added, ”Not that I expect you’ll want to be paid for the privilege, seeing as I’m giving you free board and lodging.”

Henrietta smiled sunnily at her maternal grandmother. “I’d be happy to help, and I do appreciate you letting me stay with you over the yuletide season. My wretched baggage is still on a ship somewhere, and my funds haven’t arrived at the bank in Truro, so I am quite done up.”

“You’ve always been disorganized.” Mrs. Bray sniffed. “There’s a bed for you in the maid’s dormitory. It’s nothing fancy.”

“Seeing as I grew up following the drum with my father, having an actual roof over my head—as opposed to a leaking tent—is a distinct improvement.” Henrietta attempted to reassure her grandmother, even though she knew the woman thrived on feeling aggrieved. It was one of the reasons Henrietta’s mother Angharad had eloped with a soldier at the age of eighteen and never returned to Cornwall.

Angharad had died when Henrietta was seven. When her father had the funds, Henrietta had been able to spend the summer months at the castle. She’d loved the place and had run wild making friends with the ghosts, the local children, and the gypsies. When her father remarried, his eminently practical second wife stopped the visits, and Henrietta had acquired at least the basics of civility, such as shoes, stockings, and stays.

On this cold winter night, those summer days seemed long gone, and her grandmother even sterner, the bitterness of the winter weather etched on her face and set deep in her gaze. They were currently in the housekeeper’s sitting room that formed part of the

kitchens in the lower regions of Castle Keyvnor.

"I will not stay long, I promise you." Henrietta reached across the table and took her grandmother's work-roughened hand in hers. "As soon as the roads are passable, I will be off to London."

"And what exactly do you intend to do up there, missy?"

"Well, the first thing I need to do is speak to my father's solicitor. He wrote me a letter asking me to call on him. I have the address." She wrinkled her nose. "I cannot imagine why he wants to see me, but I feel I should go."

"Your father probably left you a pile of debts and fathered three bastards on the side. Even though he is deceased, I cannot pray for his soul." Her grandmother raised her chin. "That man ruined my daughter's life."

Henrietta concentrated on sipping her tea as a wave of grief engulfed her. She would not speak ill of the man who had been her whole world for most of her life. He could've left her to the coldness of her grandmother, but he'd refused to do that, and had taken her all over Europe—occasionally into danger, perhaps, but he'd never let her down, and he'd loved her mother.

The clock on the wall chimed nine times. Her grandmother stood and smoothed her hands over her apron. "It's getting late. I have to be up at six in the morning. Let me show you your room."

"Thank you, Grandmother." Henrietta stood as well, opened the door, and took the tea tray over to the scullery end of the huge kitchen. "I really do appreciate you letting me stay here."

Her grandmother paused by the vast kitchen table. "While you are residing in this house, perhaps you would call me by my title, Mrs. Bray? I don't want the staff to think I'm getting soft in my old age or that you are being too familiar."

"Of course, Grand—I mean Mrs. Bray." As that was how she thought of the woman anyway, it would not be a hardship. "I will do my best to remember."

"Then come with me."

Henrietta gathered up the heavy folds of her black travelling gown and followed Mrs. Bray up endless flights of narrow stone stairs to the top floor. A howling wind careered along the darkened corridor. The housekeeper tutted as she shut the small, diamond-paned window at the end of the hallway.

"No matter how many times I close this dratted thing, it always blows open again."

As Henrietta paused to regain her breath at the top of the stairs, a ghostly figure appeared behind her grandmother, waving and doffing his plumed hat.

Henrietta grinned and mouthed the words, “Good evening, Benedict.”

He winked and disappeared.

“Here you are, then.” Mrs. Bray unlocked a door and stepped inside. “The maid’s aired the bed last week. We were expecting a lady’s abigail, but she didn’t arrive. I’m also expecting a valet and another gentleman tonight, but they haven’t turned up either.”

“I’m sure they’ll appear at some point.” Even with the window closed, the salt-laced sea air permeated the small room. Henrietta immediately felt at home. “Thank you.”

She placed her small bag and reticule on the bed and turned to her grandmother, who still hadn’t managed a welcoming smile. Luckily, Henrietta was no longer a small child to be cowed, but a grown woman of experience who was accustomed to dealing with all kinds of emergencies.

“Goodnight, Mrs. Bray.”

“Goodnight, Henrietta.” Mrs. Bray paused in the doorway. “I don’t need to remind you to use the back stairs, and stay out of the way of our guests, do I?”

“Of course not,” Henrietta replied. “I know my place here.”

“Good, now don’t forget it.”

Henrietta closed the door and grimaced at the bed. “As if you’d let me.”

She walked over to the tiny window, sat on the window seat, and squinted out into the moonlight. There was a hint of frost in the air, and it was already sparkling on the rock surfaces, softening the harsh lines of the walls into a fairytale castle. In a few weeks she would be leaving this place—possibly forever. It was not in her nature to dwell on the darker problems of life. Whatever her grandmother said, Henrietta would make sure to enjoy every minute of her unexpected stay.

#

“As our parents were…unable to attend the weddings, I considered it my duty to represent the Priske family to the best of my ability.”

Benjamin Priske, Baron Saxelby, the oldest son and heir of the

Earl of Widcombe, bowed stiffly to his sister Cassandra and her husband Jack as they entered the drawing room of Hollybrook Park. It was quite late. He'd arrived just as dinner was being served and spent the last two hours kicking his heels in the empty room waiting for his sister to finish dinner and join him.

"Unable to attend?" Cassandra raised her eyebrows as she took a seat. "You mean that Mama was so scandalized by the behavior of her two daughters that she threatened never to darken the door of Castle Keyvnor again?"

"Which, seeing as the weddings have nothing to do with her daughters, makes no sense at all," Cassandra's husband, Jack Hazelwood, Lord St. Giles pointed out.

Benjamin frowned at his brother-in-law's attempt at levity. "Regardless, I thought it only right that I should attend the wedding."

"What about me?" Cassandra pouted. "I'm a Priske."

"No you're not." Jack kissed his wife's hand. "You're all mine now."

Benjamin sighed, knowing that within seconds his sister and her husband would lose all sense of manners and possibly even start canoodling in public.

"I am the heir to the title," Benjamin repeated patiently. "And I must say that I intend to enjoy my visit to this remote part of the country. I have never been here before, so all is well."

"Good." Cassy smiled at him. "You really are the best of brothers."

He found himself smiling back at her. She was definitely his favorite sibling. It was good to see her so happy. Her marriage had left him feeling quite alone in the confusion of the Priske family. Sometimes he felt as if he were the only person to have his feet firmly on the ground, and not live in alt.

"I'm staying at the castle, so I'd better get over there. I only came here to make sure that you had arrived safely." Benjamin sighed. "I do hope someone is up to receive me."

Cassandra frowned. "It is unfortunate that our hosts mentioned that this house is currently full to bursting so there is no room for you."

"Then I'll take my chances at the castle. I should be there before ten." Benjamin went over to kiss his sister's cheek. "I'll come and see you tomorrow when I'm settled in."

“That would be lovely. Good night, brother, dear.”

The weddings were being held on the twenty-fourth of December, so Benjamin had a few days to renew his acquaintance with fellow guests his first cousins Lord Michael Beck, and Anthony, Viscount Redgrave. In truth, he really was glad to escape to the countryside. His mother seemed determined that he should wed, and had introduced him to a whole slew of ridiculously young ladies at every possible opportunity. Hopefully in the wilds of Cornwall, and at a wedding, he wouldn’t encounter a single marriageable female at all.

Benjamin gathered his belongings and exited the house through the kitchens to access the stable where he’d left his horse. Apparently, it wasn’t that far to Castle Keyvnor. Even at night it was impossible to miss the looming bulk of the high stone walls and crenellated ramparts. His horse seemed to know the way along the cliff path, which was remarkably comforting seeing as the sheer drop and the endless sound of crashing waves on one side of him was hardly reassuring.

It was good to be away from London, and his mother in particular. He was sick and tired of having to be the responsible one in the family—the person everyone laughed at behind his back for being so predictable and stuffy. But what else was the heir to a title supposed to do? He had no taste for gambling, excessive fornication, or sporting excellence. He had no desire to be known as a notorious rake.

At one point in his life he’d wanted to become an explorer, but that notion had been quashed by the advent of the war. He was what he was—a gentleman of good family with a spotless reputation and nothing else to recommend him except possibly his title. That was the only reason any woman would encourage his suit.

Benjamin rammed his hat down on his head as the breeze toyed with the brim like plucking fingers. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to just visit a place where neither he nor his family name was known? To simply be liked for himself?

He shoved such lowering thoughts behind him and concentrated on the lights of the castle ahead. His horse crossed over the dry moat into the courtyard that looked as if it hadn’t changed much since medieval times. He imagined himself as a dashing knight seeking his fair lady and snorted so loudly at the absurd notion that

he scared his horse.

When he reached the stables, a yawning groom came out to greet him, took his horse, and directed him toward the side entrance of the castle. Benjamin slung his saddlebags over his shoulder and grabbed his overnight bag. The rest of his belongings were due to arrive on the morrow. After suffering days confined to his carriage, he'd left his valet at the last large posting inn and carried on without him.

His drab coat and breeches were covered in mud, and he currently had no replacements. It was one of the reasons why he hadn't made himself known to his host at Hollybrook Park and demanded to be seated at the dinner table. Some of his friends considered him old-fashioned, but in his opinion good manners never went out of style.

He knocked on the door and waited impatiently, the coldness creeping into his clothing and skin like icy fingers on the back of his neck. He knocked again—this time louder—and looked up at the imposing stone walls. Someone had better come soon, or he'd turn into an ice sculpture.

#

Henrietta paused on the stairs, candle in hand and considered the impatient knocking echoing around the kitchen. She'd come down to acquire more candles for her room, and had paused to add fuel to the kitchen stove. Someone wanted access to the castle, and, from what she could see, the entire kitchen and house staff had already retired to bed. Even the scullery maid, whose job it was to keep the fires going all night, seemed to be sleeping through the noise.

Holding the candle high, she warily considered the complicated locks and bolts. Even as she wondered how to open them, a ghostly hand reached over her shoulder, and everything slid back, allowing the door to swing wide.

"Thank you, Benedict," Henrietta whispered.

A man stood on the step, his expression a mixture of tiredness and exasperation. He carried some baggage over his shoulder and was remarkably muddy. He opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it again, and then just gawped at her as if he could see Benedict over her shoulder.

"Yes?" Henrietta smiled encouragingly. "May I help you?"

“Good evening.” He inclined his head an abrupt inch. “I apologize for the lateness of my arrival.”

“Do come in. You were expected much earlier.” She stepped aside to let him in and closed the door. “Do you need anything to eat or drink, or shall I take you straight up to your room?”

The man blinked at her as he removed his hat to reveal ruffled hair the auburn red of a fox. “You know who I am?”

“My grandmother—I mean Mrs. Bray—said you might be late,” Henrietta said diplomatically. She hoped Mr. Drake, the steward, had answered the front door to the man’s master. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, I’ve—”

“Then come on up to your room. You must be exhausted.”

Henrietta took her candle and started up the servants’ stairs, her other hand holding her skirts clear of the treacherous spiral stone steps. She’d changed into her nightgown earlier and had draped a thick woolen shawl around her shoulders. She was aware that her unpinned hair was flowing down her back and hoped her companion wouldn’t comment on such informality of dress.

“Mr. Drake will settle your employer into his room. I expect he won’t need you until the morning.”

“I think you mistake—”

“Oh, will he require your presence immediately?” Henrietta carried on climbing, aware that her companion wasn’t even out of breath. “Is he one of those pampered aristocrats who can’t put himself to bed?”

“No, he’s, I mean, I’m—”

“Here you are.” Henrietta indicated the door to the left of the passageway. “Male staff are on this side of the attics, females on the right. If you need anything, I’m in the first room past the landing. They used to lock the two doors between the males and females at night, but the castle ghosts didn’t appreciate it, so eventually they gave up.”

“The castle *ghosts*?”

“Yes, we have a few regular visitors and occasionally a new one shows up, usually when there is a crisis. I understand that the reading of the Banfield will at Halloween encouraged a good deal of ghostly activity.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“Why should it?” She paused to look down at him on the stair

below her. The candlelight revealed a glint of copper in his hair, which was mirrored in his brown eyes. “I spent my summers here as a child, and all the ghosts were very polite to me.”

Something in his skeptical expression told her that he was not a believer in spirits and was too polite to say so.

“We have pixies in the woods as well.” Henrietta couldn’t help but add.

“Indeed.”

Henrietta turned left and walked along the row until she found the only open and unoccupied room.

“Here you are.” She stood back to let him go in. “It isn’t much, but it’s clean, and the roof doesn’t leak.”

“Thank you.” He paused beside her, topping her by at least a foot. “This is very kind of you, but—”

“Not at all.” Henrietta smiled at him. “I’m not sure why none of the castle staff was waiting up for you, but I’m glad I was able to help.” She handed him the candle. “There’s water in the jug if you need to wash. In the morning, just follow the stairs down to the kitchen, and you’ll be fine.”

“But—” The man sighed and then looked longingly at the bed. “I am somewhat fatigued…”

“Then I’ll wish you a good night’s sleep.” She paused. “My name is Henrietta. I’m related to Mrs. Bray, the castle housekeeper.”

“I’m…” He looked down at her, his brown eyes quizzical. “Benjamin. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Benjamin, not Ben or Benny?”

His mouth turned up at one corner. “No. I dislike it when people shorten my name.”

“So do I. Can you imagine being called Hetty or Hen or even worse, *Henny*?”

“That would indeed be a crime.” He actually managed a smile. “I suggest we make a pact and agree never to call each other Henny or Benny, or answer to anyone who does.”

“Agreed.” She chuckled as she handed him the candle. His language was that of the upper classes. Was he a returned soldier down on his luck, or perhaps the fourth son of an impoverished peer who had received the best education but no money to support himself? She’d met plenty of both on her travels abroad with the army.

“Goodnight, Benjamin.”

“Goodnight, Miss Henrietta.”

Henrietta offered him one last smile and left the room, making her way by instinct along the darkened corridor to her own small bedchamber. She paused to light a new candle from the fire. Benjamin had seemed rather confused…. Should she check that his master had been admitted through the front door? It wasn’t really her job to do anything in the castle, seeing as the Banfield family didn’t employ her, but she didn’t want Benjamin to get into trouble.

She opened her door and heard voices echoing way down below in the stairway. It sounded as if Mr. Drake was indeed awake and tending to the needs of the new arrival, which meant she was free to go to bed. She hoped poor Benjamin wouldn’t have to get up again to attend to his employer. He’d looked rather cold and weary and had been nothing but polite to her.

She shut the door and made sure the latch was in place. She was already looking forward to seeing Benjamin not Ben again on the morrow. She’d enjoyed his quiet smile and dry sense of humor and sensed a kindred spirit—if spirit was the right word to use in a haunted castle. She banked up the small fire and closed the patchwork curtains.

Depending on the state of the roads after Christmas, she might be in London by the first week of January. Sitting down on the bed, she took out the letter and puzzled over it again. The notion that her father had written a will was surprising enough. That it warranted an expensive letter from a solicitor insisting she meet him in person was passing strange.

Her stepmother had died a year previously, so she supposed there was no one left to deal with her father’s last requests. He’d broken off contact with his family after marrying her mother. He had enjoyed gambling and other pursuits he couldn’t really afford on his officer’s salary. She could only pray that her grandmother wasn’t correct, and she wasn’t about to inherit a pile of debt…

Could a woman be forced to pay back debts of honor?

Henrietta bit her lip. Immediately after she’d arrived in England, she’d written back to the solicitor, given him her temporary address at the castle, and asked if the meeting was really necessary. She’d received an offer from a fellow officer’s daughter to become her children’s governess, so Henrietta wasn’t worried about starving. She would have a home in Hertfordshire with a family she liked and respected and would be earning a generous wage. With that

resolved, she braided her hair and climbed into bed, shivering at the coldness of the sheets as she slid between them.

In the meantime, she would attempt to stay out of her grandmother's way and enjoy both the weddings and the yuletide celebrations without anyone noticing she was present.

Except the ghosts, of course.

Chapter 2

Benjamin finally awoke when the narrow beam of sunlight emanating from the small window in his bedchamber landed squarely on his face. He opened his eyes, winced, and closed them again. It was remarkably quiet up here in the heights of the castle, and he wondered what the time was. The room was so small that he only had to put out a hand to reach his coat hanging over the back of the chair close to the small fire.

He found his pocket watch, and blearily regarded the dial only to discover he'd forgotten to wind it the previous night. Benjamin groaned. He normally wound his watch before he went to sleep and put it under his pillow. Last night he'd been so exhausted that, after washing off as much of the mud as he could manage with one jug of cold water and an inadequate basin, he'd gone straight to sleep.

The bed was more comfortable than the one he'd endured at the last inn, and the linens, although old, were freshly starched and smelled of the sea. He placed his watch on the chest next to his bed alongside his other belongings and allowed his thoughts to slide back to the events of the previous night.

Henrietta…

When she'd opened the door to him in all her golden glory, he'd almost swallowed his tongue. He remembered the long, lush sweep of her hair over her shoulders, the whiteness of her nightgown, the delicate pink on her cheeks, and the laughter in her eyes that begged a response. She'd almost glowed with warmth and welcome, like some kind of pagan goddess from the Greek plays he'd been forced to study at school. For one glorious, terrifying second he'd considered stepping across the threshold and gathering her close, burying his face in the sweet softness where her neck met her shoulder and then kissing her.

Benjamin's cock jumped, and he slid a hand beneath the covers in instinctive protest.

"Steady on, old chap," he muttered. "We only just met the

woman."

His cock didn't seem to care about that minor detail, so Benjamin attempted to be the responsible one, and gather the facts. All he knew was that Henrietta was related to the housekeeper of Castle Keyvnor. Her accent held no hint of Cornwall. In fact she sounded remarkably like one of his sisters, which begged the question of what she'd been doing in the kitchen in the first place.

Had she returned to the castle as a guest for the wedding and simply wandered down to find refreshment in the familiar kitchen? Benjamin frowned. But she'd told him she was sleeping in the servants' quarters, so she was probably not a guest. Was she a lady's companion or a governess? That seemed far more likely.

It occurred to him that he needed to get up and make himself known to his hosts. He hoped that his valet, and the rest of his wardrobe, had arrived at the castle. He wasn't a dandy, but he did like his dress to be precise, and he was extremely reluctant to put on any of the garments he had carefully hung to dry the night before.

Just as he sat up, the door of his chamber flew open, and Henrietta stepped into the room. She wore a plain brown gown with no flounces and a modest neckline. Her glorious blonde hair was braided in a coronet on her head. When her startled gaze met his, her hand flew to her bosom.

"Oh, my goodness. I do beg your pardon, Benjamin. I thought you would be long gone!" She pointed at his clothes. "Earlier this morning it occurred to me that your clothing might need to be brushed down or properly dried out."

Benjamin stayed put in the bed, pulling the sheet up to his chin as if he were a frightened maiden aunt.

Henrietta poked his coat and tutted. "Everything is still damp." With a decisive gesture, she swept all his clothing off the chair and gathered it in her arms. "Stay there. I'll bring you something clean to wear."

"But—"

Even before he'd formed his protest, Henrietta had gone. Would the damned woman ever let him finish a *sentence*? He contemplated his options, realized he had none unless he was willing to parade around in a sheet, and waited rather impatiently for her return.

To her credit, she was back within a quarter of an hour carrying a stack of folded garments and a jug full of steaming-hot water.

“Mr. Drake, our steward, is of a similar build and height to you. He’s so high and mighty that he’ll never notice that a mere *valet* is wearing his third-best set of clothes. Even if he does notice something amiss, he’ll simply assume you have excellent taste.

“You *stole* these clothes?” Benjamin asked slowly.

“Of course not! I merely *borrowed* them from the laundry.” Henrietta smiled encouragingly at him. “As soon as yours are fit to be worn again, I’ll simply put Mr. Drake’s back in the washing pile. No one will notice.”

She put the pile on the end of the bed, but still lingered.

“I’m surprised that you aren’t already up.”

“How could I be when we both agree that my clothes weren’t presentable?” Benjamin said. “Did you picture me improvising my bedsheets into a toga?”

“I did rather contradict myself, didn’t I?” Her smile was a delight. She studied him seriously. “Although you do have the physique for a toga.”

“Do you think so?” He instinctively squared his shoulders. “I doubt anyone would have been pleased to see me dressed like that.”

“My grandmother would banish you from her kitchens. Cook and the maids would have the vapors, or think you were one of the castle ghosts and ignore you completely.”

“Until I walked into a door or kicked over a pail.” Benjamin was enjoying himself immensely. Being invisible and unknown certainly had its advantages—rather like one of the castle ghosts. He reached for the clothes. “Thank you for bringing these.”

“You are most welcome.” Henrietta turned toward the door. “Come down to the kitchens when you are dressed and break your fast. There is always lots left over from feeding the family and guests upstairs.”

As if in agreement with Henrietta’s suggestion, Benjamin’s stomach gave a loud gurgle.

“Thank you.”

She left, closing the door behind her and leaving the faint scent of violets mingling with the lye from the laundry. Benjamin examined the clothing. It was, as he had expected, not that of a peer’s son, but of an upper servant. He really should have tried harder to explain who he was, so what had stopped him?

He slowly unfolded the shirt. He’d been enjoying the freedom of just talking without having to think about what he said or how it

reflected on his family. Henrietta treated him as an ordinary man rather than the title he'd inherited at birth and been known as since he was sent away to school. He *was* Saxelby. That was both his destiny and his designation until he succeeded to his father's earldom, and then he'd simply be Widcome

Never Benjamin. Never just himself.

At this point, he had no choice but to get dressed in the steward's clothes. He might as well go down to the kitchen, enjoy a decent breakfast, and *then* attempt to unravel the complications he had inadvertently set in motion. Benjamin sighed. Would Henrietta ever speak to him with the same freedom again? He sincerely doubted it, but his attraction to her was based on a fantasy, and that wasn't how he lived his life. Maybe it was for the best to nip his ridiculous dreams in the bud.

#

Henrietta sipped her tea in companionable silence with Mary, the kitchen maid whom she'd first met as a babe in her mother's arms. It was relatively quiet in the huge kitchen. Cook had disappeared upstairs to consult with the lady of the house about the dinner menus, and the rest of the servants were either cleaning the castle, setting fires, or serving at the breakfast table.

"There's something wrong in the castle," Mary repeated firmly. "The ghosts are agitated."

"Do you think it is because we have so many visitors?" Henrietta asked. "The ghosts always used to resent newcomers."

"It's more than that." Mary shivered. "I can't quite explain it, but I can feel it in my bones."

Henrietta patted Mary's hand. "Is there anyone you can talk to about this?"

"I already have. The witches, the healers, and the gypsies all say the same thing. They tell me to be strong and that this too will pass."

"That's remarkably vague and hardly helpful," Henrietta pointed out. "Which is typical. What is the good of a prophecy if no one can understand what it's trying to say?"

Someone cleared his throat, and she looked up to see Benjamin coming through the kitchen door. He looked remarkably fine in his borrowed clothes, his auburn hair now tamed and his boots

gleaming.

"Come and sit down." She gestured at the food lining the center of the table. "There is a nice piece of ham, coddled eggs, toast…"

"Thank you."

Even as she spoke, he was removing the silver covers and helping himself to the platters' contents with an assurance that yet again reminded her that he was an anomaly. She had some news to share with him, but was more than willing to wait until he was stuffed full of food and more malleable. The strategy had always worked with her father.

Mary rose to refill the huge kettles that ensured the castle always had hot water for the guests and for the kitchen cooking needs. Henrietta helped her, and then sat at the table, squeezing one last drop of tea out of the pot before turning to observe Benjamin.

He had a very finely drawn face with delicate features and high cheekbones, but there was nothing weak about him. He carried with him that innate self-confidence all the gentry did, which made Henrietta even more curious as to how he'd ended up as somebody's servant.

Eventually, he heaved a sigh and sat back, patting his stomach. "That was excellent."

"I'll tell Cook." Henrietta refilled the teapot with boiling water and set it back on the table to brew.

"Why didn't you use new leaves?" Benjamin asked.

"Because they are expensive." Henrietta stared at him. "And why waste them?"

He shrugged and pushed his cup over to her.

"You'd better wait a moment unless you want your tea to taste like dishwater," Henrietta warned him.

"Then I'll wait."

He seemed supremely unconcerned about his duties as a valet.

"Are you not worried that Lord Michael Beck might need your assistance this morning?" Henrietta asked cautiously.

He blinked at her. "My assistance?"

"Isn't he your employer? I regret to say that there was no room for him. He ended up sleeping on the floor of Lord Blackwater's room."

"Did he, by Jove?" Benjamin grinned. "Then I'll wager I had a better night's sleep than he did."

Henrietta studied him carefully. “Are you always so…cavalier when you speak about your employer?”

His smile instantly died. “Not at all. He isn’t my employer.”

“But you know him.”

“Only by reputation.” He hesitated. “The thing is, I was expecting the Saxelby carriage.”

“Oh! Mr. Drake said that one hadn’t yet arrived. There has been some flooding on the roads out of Bocka Morrow, so it is possible that your employer and his carriage are stuck at a nearby inn. I do hope your employer arrives in time for the weddings. It would be terrible to come all this way and then miss them.”

“Indeed.” Benjamin sighed. “Then I will have no change of clothes until the carriage and its occupants arrive.”

“But at least you are free of your master for a few days.”

He looked at her strangely. “That is true.”

“No one will know if you spend your time exploring the castle or simply put your feet up and get in everyone’s way.”

“I’m not sure I know how to do either of those things anymore,” Benjamin said slowly. “My life has been so regimented.”

“Were you in the military?” Henrietta asked.

“No, I wasn’t allowed to sign up.” He glanced at her. “Does that diminish me in your eyes?”

“Why should it? Having seen war at close quarters I cannot say I find it as heroic and inspiring as those who have never fought seem to do.”

“You have members of the military in your family?”

“My father was a soldier. I followed the drum for most of my childhood, and…my husband also served.”

“You are married?”

“Widowed.” She forced a bright smile. “We were barely married for a year before he was killed in some stupid, unnecessary skirmish.”

He reached across and took her hand, his grip surprisingly gentle. “I…am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, but my marriage was a long time ago when I was barely eighteen, and an extremely foolish decision to make in more ways than one.”

She was babbling now and eager to end the conversation, which had strayed into territory she normally avoided. Why was she sharing confidences with a man she barely knew, a man who didn’t

quite fit into her gray world and probably never could?

"Henrietta?" Mrs. Bray came into the kitchen.

She pulled her hand away and stood up, aware that her cheeks were warm and her heart was pounding. Benjamin stood as well.

"Mrs. Bray, may I introduce you to Benjamin?" Henrietta rushed to make the introductions. "He is the valet of the still-missing, but probably-delayed-at-an-inn, Lord Saxelby."

"Ma'am." Benjamin bowed. "I do apologize for my presence here, but—"

Mrs. Bray cut across him. "Never mind that now, you can make yourself useful. Accompany Henrietta to the culvery and see how many pigeons we have. Cook wants to know if she has enough for the pies or if we need to order more."

"But—"

Benjamin looked as if he wanted to argue, which was never a good idea with her grandmother who had been known to clip a cocky footman around the ear. Henrietta poked him in the ribs, and he went quiet.

"We'll go and check that right now, Mrs. Bray," Henrietta said brightly. "Is there anything else we can do for you while we're out?"

"You can pick some greenery, especially holly if you can find any." Mrs. Bray sniffed. "*They* want to bring as much yuletide spirit into the castle as possible. Of course none of *them* have to deal with picking up all the dead leaves or the influx of insects such an intrusion will cause."

"It will make the castle smell lovely, though," Henrietta said. "I'll take my basket and see what I can find."

#

Benjamin insisted on carrying Henrietta's large wicker basket as they left the kitchen and entered the walled courtyard. A confusion of noise made Benjamin look behind him, only to discover an all too familiar face emerging from the stables. He quickly turned back, hoping his cousin Michael hadn't spotted him across the crowded space. No one called him by name, so Benjamin forced himself to relax and kept walking, his gaze lowered.

"Ah, the lovely Henrietta."

He came to an abrupt stop as a man stepped out of the shadows

of the castle wall and into his companion's path.

"Good morning, Lord Hayfield," Henrietta said.

"And where are you off to this morning, my pretty lass?" Hayfield winked and patted Henrietta on the rear. "And more to the point, would you like some company?"

Henrietta smiled. "I already have some help, thank you, sir. I wish you good day."

"No need to play coy with me, missy, I—"

Benjamin stiffened and took a step forward as Hayfield grabbed Henrietta's wrist. Before he could do anything more, the earl emitted a strangled gasp and stumbled back against the wall.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon, my lord," Henrietta said sweetly. "My foot slipped."

She shrugged out of his slackened grasp and moved off at some speed, Benjamin trailing in her wake. She opened a gate that led into a small wooded area and closed it behind them.

"Hurry up, Benjamin. We don't want him to catch up with us. Sometimes he is *remarkably* persistent."

"Hayfield often tries to put his hands on you?" Benjamin asked.

The gaze she offered him was full of wry amusement. "Of course he does. He's a letch of the first order. I learned to deal with men like that when I was quite young. My father taught me all kinds of tricks."

"But you are a *lady*."

"In Lord Hayfield's eyes I'm a woman and easy prey." She frowned up at him. "How can you be so naïve about such matters? You know how gentlemen categorize women." She ticked them off on her fingers. "There are whores for physical activity, there are mistresses for pleasure, and then there are ladies who must be treated like precious angels."

"That's—" Benjamin couldn't really fault her logic even though hearing it spoken out loud made him feel embarrassed for his sex.

"And servants mimic their betters, so it's not much better among them, either." She heaved a sigh as she led him along a narrow woodland path that sloped toward the outer defenses and the cliff walls of the castle. It was very quiet beneath the trees, as if everything was holding its breath.

"The culvery is down here." Henrietta indicated an even narrower path to their left.

"What *is* a culvery?"

“It’s an old Cornish word for dovecote. Culver means pigeon, and hay is house or homestead.”

“Ah, I suppose that makes sense.”

Benjamin peered into the rapidly encroaching forest. The pathway became a tunnel as the bushes on either side reached overhead to grasp and mingle, creating an impenetrable tangle of green darkness like the ribcage of a giant creature. For the first time in his life, Benjamin considered the possibility that the notion of a wood being bewitched might be true.

A long, bony, spine-like digit poked his rear, and Benjamin almost stumbled. He had never enjoyed the sensation of being trapped. He put out his hand for balance and encountered something prickly.

“Ouch.” He quickly withdrew his hand. “Something stabbed me.”

“I’d better check to make sure it’s not a pixie bite when we reach the culvery.” Henrietta said. “We’re almost there.”

“A *pixie* bite?” Benjamin looked down at the tiny pinpricks of blood on his thumb and decided not to put it in his mouth.

“Their bites can cause all kinds of problems.” Henrietta moved aside so that he could join her in a sudden circle of bright light that made him blink hard. “I was bitten on the toe when I was a child, and I couldn’t sit down for a day and a night. I had to dance.” She chuckled. “You can imagine how Mrs. Bray felt about that. She locked me in my bedchamber and left me to dance my fairy jig alone.”

Benjamin stared down at her laughing face, and all thoughts of disagreeing with her completely irrational story fled from his head. He’d never met anyone who seemed so sure of themselves, so content with their lot. She confounded all his expectations, and that was unacceptable.

“Which are you, then?” Benjamin blurted. “Where do you fit in?”

Her smile died, and she took an unsteady step away from him, her blue gaze a mixture of hurt and derision.

“Whore, mistress, or lady? Why do you ask? Are you trying to decide whether to force me, pay me, or marry me?”

“No! Good God, *no*!” Benjamin winced at his own ineptitude. “I meant which *class* do you belong to.”

She didn’t look any happier. “My father was a gentleman, my

mother was the daughter of a housekeeper. Why does it matter?"

Having already offended her, Benjamin decided he had nothing to lose by ploughing ahead. "You speak like a lady."

"*You* speak like a gentleman." She raised an eyebrow. "But sometimes you don't act like one."

"I went to a good school and learned my manners." He bowed. "I apologize if you do not consider them adequate."

"I eventually went to school in Belgium," Henrietta said. "My new stepmother insisted I was too old to be running around with my father dressed as a boy."

He pictured her in breeches, and his mind went to windmills again. "He dressed you as a *boy*?"

"It was safer. When he wasn't soldiering, he was gambling. I didn't mind. I actually missed the freedom of wearing breeches." She scowled. "In the convent I had to behave myself, wear dresses, stockings, and stays. I hated it."

Benjamin quashed an irrational desire to get hold of Henrietta's father and shake some sense into him. How could a man she obviously adored have allowed her to face such dangers? He sought for a more neutral question.

"How long were you incarcerated in the convent?"

"From the age of twelve to eighteen, which is when I did something very stupid and eloped with the soldier my father employed to send messages to me."

Benjamin realized he was staring again, his mouth agape, and tried to regain his senses. The beautiful woman opposite him had enjoyed a far more thrilling and adventurous life than he would ever have. If she'd met him at a ball or at the house of an acquaintance, she would never have bothered to speak to him more than once because he would have bored her within seconds.

A pigeon flapped past his ear, startling him. Now that he was paying attention, he could hear the sound of cooing coming from the octagonal stone structure in the center of the clearing. It was clearly very old, with a domed top and a wide stone doorway, which was fitted with a modern-looking wooden door and a lock. He hastily cleared his throat.

"Do we have the key?"

#

Henrietta gave Benjamin a strange look as he suddenly abandoned his blunt questions about everything in her life and returned to the more mundane matter of the pigeons. Why she had even gotten into conversation about her childhood and doomed marriage was a mystery. But there was something about Benjamin's dogged determination to uncover the truth that appealed to her. He wasn't afraid to ask the questions most people avoided. Not that she had satisfactory answers for him, but that was another issue entirely.

She produced the large iron key from her pocket and held it up. "Let's try not to startle them too much when we enter."

"We're going inside?" Benjamin asked.

"How else are we going to count the pigeons?" Henrietta unlocked the door and held her breath as the rank odor of feathers and pigeon droppings exploded from the opening.

She glanced back and frowned. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking off my coat," Benjamin replied. "I don't want to ruin it."

Henrietta hid a smile as he neatly folded the garment and placed it on a flat rock near the grass. She only hoped the pixies didn't run away with it.

Behind her, Benjamin sneezed, turning his back to avoid frightening the pigeons. Holding her skirts clear of the ground, Henrietta stepped inside the culvery and looked up. By her reckoning, the hexagonal space was about ten feet across and almost twenty feet high. The lime-washed walls and opening at the top made it far easier to see inside than one would imagine from the dour exterior.

"It's lighter than I thought it would be," Benjamin spoke softly as he stood close by her. "I'll wager there are almost two hundred nesting alcoves in here."

"Indeed." Henrietta turned a slow circle, counting how many of the hand-carved niches were filled with pigeons, and how many showed signs of recent occupation. "Obviously, they aren't all in at the moment, probably out paying calls, but I think there are at least eighty pigeons nesting here."

"And some doves." Benjamin directed her attention to the other side of the dome, his hand on her shoulder, his mouth brushing against her ear. A thrill of warmth ran down her spine, making her breathless.

"How appropriate for a wedding," she managed to say as he

went still, his mouth lingering by her ear as he slowly inhaled.

"Henrietta…"

She closed her eyes and leaned fractionally toward him.

"Atchoo!" Benjamin's sneeze ricocheted off the wall, sending the pigeons into a frenzy of flapping, defecating, and panicked flying that necessitated their quick escape from the dovecote.

He laughed as he grabbed her hand and towed her toward the door and into the delightfully fresh air. They both gulped it down as Henrietta remembered to lock the door behind them. Had she almost let Benjamin *kiss* her? Had she wanted that? Or was there some magic in the woods that was leading her astray in another pointless jig?

"There, we can go now." She turned to find Benjamin close behind her again, one hand braced on the stone lintel to the side of the door.

"May I kiss you?"

She considered his serious expression, her heart beating with the intense rhythm of a marching battalion. She was leaving soon and would likely never return to Castle Keyvnor and, oh God, she yearned to be touched, to be held, to be *cherished*…

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because I can't think of anything else I'd rather do at this moment than kiss you, and, if I don't, I suspect I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

"That's a remarkably long time," Henrietta said.

He smiled. "I sound like a complete fool, don't I? But that's what you have reduced me to without even trying."

"What happens after we kiss?"

He gestured to the basket at his feet. "We go and collect some greenery to decorate the castle." He hesitated. "I hate to sound somewhat theatrical, but I fear this moment, and our meeting, has something of a dreamlike quality to it, and that if I do not act now it will be gone forever."

"People say that a lot about Castle Keyvnor."

He took a step closer. "Then may I?"

Henrietta nodded as he reached out his hand and gently removed a feather from her hair. Before she could thank him, he leaned in and kissed her lips with a deliberate slowness that made her whole body go still. She became aware of the smallest things, the mint scent of his breath, the drenched greenness around them,

and the now-silent birds.

His tongue teased a line along her lips, and she yielded her mouth to him along with possession of her senses. She'd been kissed before, but never like this—with such sweetness and such seriousness.

With a ragged sound, she slid her hand around the back of his neck and held him just where she wanted him as he ravaged her mouth in an endless dance that neither of them seemed willing to end. His arm encircled her hips, bringing their bodies together, making her aware that he was hard and that she wanted that as well.

He would think her wanton… He would categorize her as a whore who was all too ready to fall on her back for him. She broke the kiss and stared into his face. His lips were slightly parted, his cheeks flushed, and he was breathing like a racehorse. There was no sign of avarice or calculation in his brown gaze, only good, honest lust and a growing hint of bewilderment.

"We should get back," Henrietta whispered.

"Yes. And, I should tell you—"

She placed her fingers on his lips. "Don't spoil the moment, Benjamin, please? Whatever it is, I'm sure it will keep."

He sighed. "I have a feeling this will not end well."

"Kissing me?" Henrietta made sure her trembling limbs would support her and eased away from the door.

"*That* was a pleasure." He shoved a hand through his disordered hair, dislodging a few feathers. After putting on his coat, he turned toward the path muttering, "It's the rest of it that will catch up with me and damn me to hell."

Henrietta decided not to question him further and set off down the path. There were several holly bushes replete with berries to plunder on their return journey that would make excellent decorations for the castle. She needed to do something to keep from launching herself at Benjamin and making all sorts of demands that would probably shock him to his core. She sensed that he was used to living in a very ordered environment and that her presence was causing him some anxiety.

But he'd kissed her. *He'd* been the one to ask, not her…

"Do you intend to reside at the castle permanently?"

Henrietta glanced over at Benjamin who appeared to have recovered his composure far more quickly than she had.

“No. I had to ask my grandmother to take me in over the Christmas season. My baggage is still on a ship somewhere and, as my financial papers are in my trunk, I cannot establish an account at a bank or afford to stay at an inn.”

“You should always carry your financial information on your person.”

“I know that, but it was supposed to be a short trip across the channel. I didn’t account for the fact that there was going to be a massive storm, making the ship have to divert to Ireland for repairs.” She scowled. “The passengers were taken over the side into small boats and left in Dover without most of our belongings.”

“Unfortunate indeed.”

“After I have secured my belongings, I am going to London.”

“Which part and where are you lodging?”

She stopped walking to stare at him. “Why does it matter?”

It was his turn to frown. “Should I apologize for being interested in the travel arrangements and accommodation of a woman traveling alone?”

“Yes, when said woman has been traveling by herself for years and has managed quite well, thank you.”

“But London is a large and dangerous city.”

“So is a battlefield, and I’ve navigated plenty of those. And helped to find and treat the wounded afterward as well.”

He slowly shook his head.

“What?” Henrietta demanded.

“You.”

He started walking again. Henrietta ended up having to chase him down and poke him in the back. “Me, what?”

“You…are magnificent.”

It was not what she’d been expecting him to say, and she just stared at him as he continued to speak.

“I have done nothing with my life, and you—a woman—have lived yours to the full.”

“Does the fact that I am a woman offend you, or is it that you have always done what is expected of you?” Henrietta asked.

“Your being a woman has nothing to do with my own inadequacies.” He shuddered. “If I hadn’t stayed home, God knows what my parents would have gotten up to, or my siblings. *Someone* had to take charge.”

Henrietta rose on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

He frowned. “What was that for?”

“For being a good man and taking care of your family.”

“Not that they appreciate it.” Benjamin sighed. “They think I’m stuffy and overprotective.”

“You *are* stuffy, but I find it quite endearing.” Henrietta kissed him again. No one had ever really protected her. “Before my stepmother came along, I felt as if it was *my* responsibility to protect and care for my father. I couldn’t imagine leaving his side.”

“You were a *child*. Our situations are quite different.”

“How old were you when you decided you had to be the sensible one in the family?” Henrietta challenged him.

Benjamin looked down at her, his arrested gaze far away as he grappled with her question.

“I don’t know. I don’t ever remember *not* feeling that way.”

“So we *are* the same. I escaped the task because my father had the sense to marry a wonderful woman. How will you escape?”

“I can’t.” His face closed up, and he stepped away from her. “Shall we continue? It looks as if it might turn to snow again.”

#

“You! Come here.”

“Yes, sir?”

Benjamin froze on the kitchen stairs and looked over to see Mr. Drake, the castle steward, beckoning imperiously to him. Henrietta had gone off with her basket of greenery, and he’d decided to head out to the stables to see if his valet and carriage had managed to put in an appearance yet. It was time to end this charade before he became far too enamored of Henrietta and hurt them both.

Dear God. Benjamin almost wanted to laugh. Was he about to be unmasked as a clothes thief *and* a fake valet?

Mr. Drake eyed him unfavorably. “Get up those stairs and help clear the table.”

“But—”

“Get on with it, lad! I know you’re a valet, but the devil finds work for idle hands, and you have nothing else to do at the moment, so help out.” He shoved Benjamin toward the door. “Mr. Morris will tell you what to do when you get up there.”

Benjamin took his time climbing the endless stone stairs, hoping with all his heart that by the time he arrived his presence would be

unnecessary. Unfortunately, the butler beckoned to him from the open door of the dining room where there was still a murmur of conversation.

"Benjamin, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Morris." Benjamin kept his gaze lowered.

"All you have to do is load the dishes onto the trays and bring them down to the kitchen. Do you think you can manage that? Breakages will come out of your wages."

Benjamin glanced into the dining room, noting it was still half-full of guests, and nodded warily. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now get started, and be quick about it."

Benjamin took up position with his back to the remaining guests, some of whom he vaguely recognized from the last London Season. He stacked china as if his life depended on it. When fully loaded, the tray was remarkably heavy. He staggered down the spiral staircase to the kitchen, holding his breath the entire way, and carefully placed the tray in the scullery where Mary was washing dishes like a madwoman.

He set off back to the dining room to repeat the process. As he stacked dishes and sorted cutlery, he noticed something very strange. None of the guests seemed aware of all the work going on around them or were mindful of the servants. Would any of his passing acquaintances even notice him in this guise? Were they too used to blocking out those who served them?

He was guilty of the same thing. He barely knew half the names of the staff at his house in London. He would remedy that when he returned…

"You." A glass was shoved against his chest. "Get me more brandy."

Benjamin glanced at the door, but the butler appeared to have gone.

"Yes, sir."

"My *lord."*

Benjamin risked an upward glance to find the unpleasant visage of the Earl of Hayfield staring back at him. Taking the glass, he walked over to the set of cut-glass decanters on the sideboard and poured the earl a hefty measure of brandy.

"Here you are, my lord." He bowed as he presented the glass to the peer who had resumed his seat by the fireplace.

"That's better. Next time use a tray and show some proper

respect for your betters." The earl raised his glass to his lips and contemplated Benjamin over the rim. "A word of warning, my fine fellow. The buxom blonde you went walking with today? She is not for your kind." His smile turned salacious. "Her…talents lie elsewhere, so keep your hands to yourself. Do you understand me?"

It took every ounce of self-discipline Benjamin possessed not to grab the obnoxious earl by the throat and shake him like a dog until he begged for mercy. Breathing hard through his nose, he took a step backward.

"Yes, my lord."

Turning his back on the despicable excuse for a human being, Benjamin stacked plates so ferociously he was in danger of smashing a few. Seeing as he'd be the one paying the bill, he considered it worth the risk. The alternative was to follow the Earl of Hayfield out of the dining room and challenge him to a duel, which would probably upset his hosts and cast a cloud over the forthcoming weddings. He had a suspicion that Henrietta wouldn't be very impressed with him either…

His elbow knocked a rather fine wine glass, sending it sideways off the table. Before he could even attempt to reach it, the glass stopped falling in midair and set itself back on the table. Benjamin blinked as a large redheaded and bearded man still holding the stem of the wine glass appeared and winked at him.

"Benedict Nankervis, at your service, sir." He bowed. Benjamin's blood froze as he realized he could still see the door through the spectral Tudor figure. "Give my best regards to Mistress Henrietta, and keep her safe, mind."

"Absolutely," Benjamin croaked, and the thing, whatever it was —he refused to call it a ghost—disappeared, leaving him with trembling limbs and the strong desire to run screaming from the room. But he couldn't afford to draw attention to himself, so he stayed put.

"Is that tray ready to go back to the kitchen, son?" Mr. Morris called out to him.

"Yes, sir." Benjamin picked up the heavy tray and headed for the door, almost colliding with his cousin Michael, who was coming in.

"I *do* beg your pardon, sir," Mr. Morris cried out. "This man isn't part of our regular staff."

"That's quite all right. My mistake, and no harm done."

Mr. Morris grabbed hold of the tray to steady it as Michael

carried on into the dining room, not even acknowledging Benjamin's existence in the slightest. Benjamin was beginning to feel as invisible as one of the ghosts. He was the heir to an earl. Was he really that forgettable even to his own blood relatives? Benjamin fought a sudden urge to laugh at his own indignation.

Not being known—being able to be himself for the first time ever—was remarkably freeing…

"Get on with you, lad, and be more careful next time." Mr. Morris sent Benjamin on his way with a slap on his back. "Tell Mr. Drake that you're done up here for now."

"Thank you, Mr. Morris," Benjamin muttered as he navigated the first awkward turn down the servants' stairs to the kitchen. Being ordered around like a lackey was also a new experience, but not one he tended to enjoy.

By the time he put the tray on the scullery table, his arms and shoulders were aching. Mary turned around from the sink and made a face.

"Drat. I thought I was done."

"Let me help you." Benjamin took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and brought the first stack of plates over to the wooden draining board. "Scraps in here for the pigs?" He pointed at the bucket below the water pump.

"Yes, please. And can you put the cutlery in the first sink and everything else in the second?" Mary gave him a sideways glance as he scraped the plates. "You don't have to be doing this, you know. You're a valet, not a kitchen boy."

"A valet with no one to valet," he reminded her as he plunged the dirty silverware into the surprisingly hot water. "I'd much rather help you than be sent back upstairs."

"I can't see why. It's far nicer up there." Mary paused. "Apart from all the ghosts, of course."

"I think I just met one," Benjamin confided to her. "A large, portly gentleman with a red beard and hair, dressed in the style of the late King Henry VIII."

"I've heard of him," Mary confirmed. "He usually only appears to those he believes he can help find love."

"Then I've no idea why he stopped that wine glass from tumbling to the floor." The ghost *had* told him to seek out Henrietta and keep her safe. Perhaps his admiration for her was more obvious than he imagined.

Benjamin couldn't help but notice how red and cracked Mary's hands were. He nudged her shoulder. "Move over. I'll wash for a while."

"Are you sure?"

He pointed at her hands. "Yes. Your knuckles are starting to bleed."

She winced as she regarded them. "I'll have to ask Cook for her special ointment."

"Why don't you go and do that while I finish up these dishes?" Benjamin suggested. "I'll be done in a trice."

"Are you sure?" Mary looked doubtfully at him. "It's not really your place—"

He waved her away. "Go on. I won't tell anyone if you won't."

In truth, he'd never washed a dish before in his life, but it wasn't that difficult. He regarded the row of pots currently simmering on the stove and grimaced, imagining how much Mary would have to deal with before the day was through. How would he like being stuck in the dark, damp castle kitchen for days on end?

He wouldn't like it at all.

He made another mental note to check the management of his kitchens when he next went home to London. Seeing life from the other side of the green baize door was proving enlightening in many ways…

Chapter 3

"Henrietta? Will you come in here, please?" Mrs. Bray stood at the door of the housekeeper's sitting room, Mr. Morris beside her. Both of them were looking rather grim.

"Yes, of course." Henrietta checked to see if Benjamin was in the kitchen, but there was no sign of him. She'd left him there when she'd gone to put the greenery in the outside scullery. Had something happened? Had they been spotted kissing at the culvery?

Mrs. Bray closed the door behind Henrietta and stood in front of the fire, hands clasped at her waist.

"There has been a…theft."

Henrietta glanced at Mr. Morris, who nodded. "Indeed."

"Of what exactly?"

"A very valuable necklace called the Eye of India." Mrs. Bray grimaced. "They *assume* it is one of the servants, but the earl still wants us to conduct a *discreet* search of all the guests' rooms, just in case it is one of their own." She sniffed. "If it is one of us, you can guarantee we'll be hauled up in front of a magistrate and sent to the gallows. If it is a *guest*, I doubt such measures will apply."

"What can I do to help?" Henrietta asked.

"Mr. Morris and I are going to quickly search the guests' rooms while the gentry are still at breakfast. I want you to check the servants' quarters." Mrs. Bray hesitated. "I suppose it *could* be one of the visiting servants who has stolen the necklace, but I have my doubts."

"Who do you think it is, Mrs. Bray?" Henrietta asked rather indiscreetly.

The housekeeper glanced over at the butler. "It's not my place to cast aspersions on anyone, but I do wonder what Mr. Timothy Cushing was thinking sending that necklace to the castle with his relative, Nathaniel Cushing. The man might be handsome, but he is quite penniless and would probably relish getting his hands on that amount of money."

“But if Mr. Cushing was the one who delivered the necklace to the castle, why didn’t he steal it earlier and just never turn up?” Henrietta pointed out. “I suspect there is more to the disappearance than we know of quite yet.”

“All *I* know is that we need to find the darned thing before someone raises the alarm and spoils the weddings,” Mr. Morris said ominously. “The family would be mortified.”

“Then I’ll start my search right away.” Henrietta curtsied. “By the way, Mrs. Bray, I think there are enough pigeons for Cook to make a dozen pies if she so desires. I don’t think we will need to ask our neighbors for assistance.”

“Good. Now get on with you and come back here when you are finished.”

Mrs. Bray still looked anxious, and for once, Henrietta couldn’t blame her. Theft in a household was a serious issue that, if not resolved quickly, would reflect badly on the housekeeper and butler and affect the morale of the staff.

Henrietta trudged up the endless stairs to the very top of the castle and started her search in the maids’ quarters. It didn’t take long, seeing as each room was small and had few places to conceal anything. After making sure she replaced every item she touched, Henrietta moved across to the men’s side of the attics and worked her way through the dozen or so rooms. Some of the castle servants were sharing to allow more room for the visiting staff, which meant piles of belongings to sort through.

After an hour, Henrietta was heartily sick of unwashed garments, smelly stockings, and damp wool. She went into Benjamin’s room last because she knew there would be little to see in there. To her surprise, he’d left a small pile of coins and a signet ring lying on the chest beside his bed in full view. Did the man have no sense?

The ring looked like it was made of heavy gold with a stone-set “S” in the center to use on sealing wax. Henrietta considered it with a frown. Had Benjamin inherited something remarkably fine from an ancestor, or had he appropriated the ring from his employer? It did have an “S” on it… Was it possible that the *real* reason Saxelby hadn’t arrived at the castle was because Benjamin had prevented him? Or worse, was Benjamin somehow in league with the jewel thief?

She scolded herself for her overactive imagination, and went

back down the stairs. She wouldn't mention it to Mrs. Bray. Benjamin was not the kind of man who would do such a thing. His forthright manner was not designed for concealment. She was allowing the fantastical nature of the castle and its horrid history to distort her normal commonsense.

A clatter of plates and a soft curse made her look toward the scullery to find Benjamin stoically washing dishes in his shirtsleeves. There was no sign of Mary.

She went over to him. "Why are you washing dishes?"

He looked up at her briefly before returning his attention to the sink. "Mary's hands were bleeding. She went to get some ointment from Cook."

"The poor girl. I know how painful that can be." Henrietta picked up one of the cloths warming by the range, and started to dry the stack of plates on the wooden draining board. "I wonder if I have an old pair of kid gloves in my belongings that I could lend her?"

"You don't have your belongings," Benjamin reminded her.

"Oh yes, that's right." Henrietta sighed. "I'll have to ask one of the healers in the village if they have something for her instead."

"I met a ghost today," Benjamin said as he handed her another plate. "He told me his name was Benedict and to give you his best regards."

"Did he now?" Henrietta smiled at him. "I thought you didn't believe in such mythical beings."

Benjamin shrugged. "In this particular locale it seems impossible not to. I owe him my thanks. He saved a glass from falling to the floor that would've cost me a week's wages."

"That was kind of him." It was also surprising, as Benedict didn't often take on a more corporeal form. "I believe he's been at the castle for a very long time. He was beheaded when he serenaded the wrong queen during the reign of King Henry VIII."

Benjamin shuddered. "Well thank goodness his head was firmly on his shoulders, and not under his arm, or else I would have thrown the entire contents of the tray at him and put myself in debt up to my eyeballs."

"Speaking of your current worldly wealth," Henrietta said. "You shouldn't leave your coins out beside your bed. Anyone could steal them."

"My coins?" He shrugged. "There's hardly anything worth

stealing."

His casual disregard for what most servants would consider a fortune was puzzling and revived her suspicions. "What about your ring, then? Surely you don't want to lose that?"

He turned to her, water dripping down his forearms, his brown gaze icy. "May I ask exactly what you were doing in my bedchamber?"

"I was…" Henrietta couldn't tell him what she'd been doing or her grandmother would never let her hear the end of it. And if Benjamin was a thief… "I just happened to be passing by."

He raised his eyebrows. "Close enough to count my change and examine my ring?"

"They were right in front of my nose," Henrietta protested.

"If your nose was in my bedchamber along with the rest of you," Benjamin snapped as he dried his hands, and picked up his coat. "Perhaps it would be better, ma'am, if you kept your person out of my bedchamber altogether!"

His whole demeanor radiated a freezing politeness that was completely at odds with the man she thought she'd begun to know. But there was nothing Henrietta could do about it except curtsey and offer him a frosty smile of her own in return.

"As you wish, sir. I beg your pardon."

He nodded curtly, marched over to the outer door that led to the stables, and slammed it behind him. Henrietta looked around to see if anyone had noticed their altercation, but, luckily, everyone was too intent on their own tasks. She let out her breath. What had happened to make her plainspoken companion transform into a suspicious and supercilious man? Was he truly hiding something, after all?

Why should she be surprised or hurt? She barely knew him and one kiss didn't reveal the true nature of a man. During her brief marriage, she'd learned that lesson rather well. She set the last plate back on the dresser. Two weddings and the Yule Ball were being celebrated at the castle on the morrow. If Benjamin's employer didn't appear for the events, perhaps it would be time for Henrietta to do some investigating of her own.

#

Benjamin's indignation as to Henrietta's invasion of his privacy

lasted all the way to the stables, which was where he finally slowed down and considered what he'd done. She probably thought he was up to no good now, when, in reality, he'd simply been worried that she'd recognized the coat of arms engraved in his signet ring and worked out exactly who he was.

If she *had* realized who he was, wouldn't she have addressed the matter? Had he even given her the opportunity? Benjamin groaned and punched the stone wall with his clenched fist.

"Can I help you?"

He glanced up from rubbing his knuckles to see one of the Keyvnor stable lads grinning at him.

"Yes. I wanted to know if the Saxelby carriage has arrived yet."

"No, it hasn't, but there is a note here to be delivered to him when he arrives."

"Thank you." Benjamin waited until the stable boy came back with a much-folded letter.

"There's one for Miss Henrietta, too. All the way from London."

"Then I'll take that to her as well."

The stable lad winked. "Maybe she'll thank you with a kiss under the mistletoe, eh mister?"

"You never know," Benjamin replied glumly, aware that the possibility Henrietta might ever kiss him again had probably been lost forever because of his guilty conscience. "Thank you."

He opened his letter as he walked slowly back to the house and paused to read the contents.

Sir, the roads are impassable for the carriage. I intend to hire a horse or gig and will endeavor to bring as much of your baggage with me as I can in order for you to attend the festivities in good order. Yours, Robert Fletcher.

Benjamin stared up at the massive bulk of the castle. Well, there was the end of his adventure. Knowing his valet's dedication to duty, Benjamin's wedding finery would be here with him on the morrow, if not sooner, and he would no longer be welcome in the kitchens. Two days of being a different man would have to do.

But it was not *enough.*

Benjamin's fist closed around the letter as he floundered through a series of conflicting emotions. He wanted more time with Henrietta. He wanted to *explain.* He had a sense that she might be the only woman on earth who *would* understand him. But to what cause? She didn't need him, and what could he offer her?

He abruptly stepped off the path to allow the Duke of Iverfyre and one of the Goodenham sisters to walk past him. They were deep in conversation and quite oblivious to his presence.

Wearily, he continued on to the kitchens, aware that his time was running out and that he owed it to Henrietta to at least tell her the truth before he was revealed as a fraud. He pushed open the massive back door and stepped into the flagstone entrance hall. And what version of the truth would he tell her? That he'd stupidly fallen in love with her the moment he'd seen her? That he wasn't who he said he was? Which truth would she want to hear, knowing that both of them would soon be leaving this place and would probably never see each other again?

He went into the kitchen proper, smiled at Mary who was sitting by the fire drinking a cup of tea, and looked around for Henrietta.

"She's in the housekeeper's sitting room," Mary piped up.

He held up the letter. "The stable lad gave me this for her."

"Then put it on the table. I'll make sure she finds it." Mary looked up at the ceiling and shivered. "The ghosts are very restless today."

"About what?" Benjamin paused to listen to the creaks and groans that occasionally sounded rather too human for his liking.

"There is a disturbance here, a source of power that is troubling them." She spoke slowly, her light blue eyes glowing like sapphires. "Have you ever heard of the legend of the Grimstone?"

"No, I haven't. Can you not call a priest to exorcise this whole misbegotten place?" A large pot rattled and fell off the rack, startling them both. Benjamin held up his hands and went to retrieve it. "No offense."

Another pot crashed to the ground inches from his outstretched hand, and he winced. "I take it back. You all have more right to be here than I do."

Mr. Drake came into the kitchen, followed by two of the footman, and frowned at Benjamin.

"Has your employer *still* not arrived?"

"He won't be much longer." Benjamin held up the note. "He is determined to arrive before the wedding."

"We shall see about that," Mr. Drake muttered. "And if he doesn't, I shall be speaking to the earl about being reimbursed for housing and feeding *you*." He glared at Benjamin. "In the meantime, you can make yourself useful. We have to prepare the Great Hall for

the weddings tomorrow and the Yule Ball later in the evening. Now come along."

Benjamin resigned himself to his fate, and, after one last longing look at the closed door of the housekeeper's room, followed the steward up the stairs into the main wing of the castle.

#

"I found it." Mrs. Bray was practically smiling. "The jewel was secreted in the belongings of Lady Daphne Goodenham."

"Lady Daphne?" Henrietta raised her eyebrows. Her relief at the thief not being Benjamin made her giddy. "I wonder what she intended to do with it? She doesn't look the type to steal things."

"You'd be surprised what the pretty ones are like," Mrs. Bray said darkly. "Some of the guests we've had over the years have looked as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths, yet have gotten up to all kinds of shenanigans."

"Did you tell the earl?" Henrietta asked.

"I did. He thanked me profusely for my assistance and loyalty, and assured me that he would deal with the matter." Mrs. Bray sighed. "Which means they'll all pretend that nothing happened after all."

"That's aristocrats for you," Mr. Morris muttered. "One rule for them and another for the rest of us."

"We've got no time to dwell on that right now, Mr. Morris," Mrs. Bray declared as she straightened her spine. "We have two weddings and a ball to prepare for tomorrow, and then it's Christmas Day. We'll all need to pull our weight."

"I'll do whatever you require of me, Mrs. Bray." Henrietta curtsied to her grandmother. "Where would you like me to start?"

After being given an extensive list of duties, Henrietta left her grandmother and the butler celebrating the successful discovery of the jewelry with a glass of port and returned to the kitchen. Cook was issuing rapid orders to her kitchen maids and Mary was busy setting out pots and pans on the kitchen table.

"There is a letter for you, Henrietta. Benjamin brought it in." Mary pointed at the corner of the table.

"That was good of him." Henrietta picked up the folded letter and put it in her apron pocket. "Where is he now?"

"He's off helping Mr. Drake in the Great Hall. He said he thinks

his employer will be arriving soon." Mary winked at her. "He was looking for you like a long-lost puppy."

"I sincerely doubt that," Henrietta replied. Unless he wanted to apologize for treating her like the servant he obviously thought she was. She'd only been in his room because Mrs. Bray had asked her to search all the quarters, and he'd reacted to her questions as if he had something to hide.

"There's no time to worry about that," Henrietta told herself firmly. She had a future to plan that didn't include worrying about a man who acted as if he was the lord of the manor rather than the lowly valet. "You have a lot to accomplish today, starting with arranging the flowers in the Great Hall."

She gathered as much greenery as she could in her basket and went up the stairs to the Great Hall, which had stood within the castle walls since medieval times. As a child, she'd loved hiding in the huge fireplace and relished all the stories of whole suckling pigs and sides of beef being cooked on revolving spits over the flames.

After centuries of use, the blackened stones at the rear of the fire would never be clean. Henrietta knew this personally because, when she was a child, one of her punishments had been to clean them with a scrubbing brush and a bucket of water. Today, the stone hearth had been swept clean and the high mantelpiece topped with candles.

She considered the foliage in her basket, aware of the noise echoing from the other end of the hall where the servants were moving furniture around. There were a few disgruntled-looking ghosts gathered in the minstrel's gallery. They always hated disruptions, although she suspected they'd all enjoy the weddings on the morrow. It was nice to see the castle in all its glory, hosting the large wedding party and the Yule Ball in the evening.

Henrietta selected a swathe of holly berries and draped them along the back of the mantelpiece. She continued adding branches until she had covered the whole length, and then placed amongst the greenery some of the more precious white and red flowers that would match the colors of the wedding party.

"That is very pretty."

Henrietta looked over her shoulder to see Miss Holly Prescott studying the fireplace. "Thank you."

"I like holly."

"It certainly brightens everything up," Henrietta agreed.

“If one can avoid the prickly parts.” Miss Holly winked and went on her way, leaving Henrietta smiling.

Now she needed someone to bring up the two large brass pots for either side of the fireplace. She went to find one of the footmen and instead found Benjamin.

“Were you looking for me?” he asked.

“Not at all.” She gave him a polite but distant smile. “You’ve already warned me to stay away from you once today.”

He sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. “I should apologize. I was worried that you—” He stopped speaking as one of the maids rushed past him. “Can we go somewhere and finish this conversation in private?”

“We can’t just walk away and leave everything to the other servants,” Henrietta objected.

“Neither of us works here. How can they miss us?” Benjamin countered impatiently. “There is something I need to tell you.”

There was the sound of raised voices at the far end of the hall, and Henrietta looked past Benjamin to see a man striding purposefully toward them. He stopped when he reached Benjamin and bowed low.

“Lord Saxelby. I am finally here. I apologize for the delay.”

Henrietta’s breath stuttered in her chest, and she dug her fingernails into the wicker handle of her basket. She turned to Benjamin, who was not looking pleased, and raised her chin.

“I have to assume that this is your valet, Lord Saxelby.”

“Yes.” Benjamin swallowed hard. “I—”

“Indeed, ma’am.” The stranger nodded to her. “Robert Fletcher at your service.”

Henrietta found a smile somewhere. “You are most welcome at Castle Keyvnor.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Robert.” Benjamin’s gaze met Henrietta’s. “If you would give me a moment, ma’am, I’d like to explain…”

“Perhaps another time.” Henrietta gathered herself and curtsied. “I have to go and help Mrs. Bray.” She paused. “Perhaps Lord Saxelby can show you up to your room, Robert? He certainly knows the way.”

Benjamin watched Henrietta march away from him and turned to

Robert. “Go down to the kitchen. I ‘ll meet you there in a minute.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Benjamin set off after Henrietta, vaguely aware of Mr. Drake shouting his name, and unwilling to stop to explain anything at this point. She wasn’t heading downstairs, but out toward the castle gardens and the entrance to the maze. He caught up with her and called her name.

“Stop. Please. Let me explain.”

She stopped walking, but she didn’t turn around. He advanced slowly toward her, aware that he was shaking.

“I never intended for this to happen.”

She swung around, her blue eyes glinting with tears. He felt it like a punch in the gut and took an impulsive step forward, hand outstretched.

“Please don’t cry.”

She raised her chin. “I’m not crying. What do you want, *my lord*?”

“I tried to tell you several times that I wasn’t what or whom you thought I was,” Benjamin said.

“That’s your defense?” She raised an eyebrow. “That I was too stupid to piece things together?”

“No, of course not! The fault is entirely mine.” He hesitated. “That first night when you mistook me for my own valet and offered me a place to sleep, I was too damn tired and grateful to care about where I was or who you thought I was.”

“And the day after that when you kissed me?”

His hand dropped to his side. “I *wanted* to kiss you. I still want —”

She cut him off. “For what purpose, sir? Are you on the lookout for a mistress, like the Earl of Hayfield? Perhaps you should talk to each other and work out who can offer me the most advantageous financial liaison.”

“As if you would condescend to become any man’s mistress,” Benjamin said. “That’s not what I want, anyway. It’s not *about* money.”

“Then you simply want me to fall into your bed and be grateful for your fleeting attention?”

“Devil take it, Henrietta. Stop putting words into my mouth!” He was shouting now, and he never shouted. “Wanting you, *needing* you, is difficult enough without you insisting on devaluing

yourself."

"*Difficult* for you?" She smiled. "I don't like being deceived, Lord Saxelby. My first husband lied about everything because he thought that by marrying me he would gain a fortune. As soon as he realized his mistake, he abandoned me. I was *eighteen* and alone in a country riven with war. I barely managed to survive." She swallowed hard. "I *hate* liars with a passion."

"So because your first husband was a cowardly fool, all men are the same?" Benjamin demanded.

"Except for my father, yes."

"The father who took you gambling, dressed you as a boy, and made you endure *living* in that war zone?"

"Do not criticize my father." Her voice was fierce and low. "At least he never pretended to be his own servant. *Why* did you do it? Was it some foolish wager?"

"I don't gamble." He set his jaw, aware that his position was indefensible, but determined to battle through anyway. "I…enjoyed your company. I liked the fact that you seemed to like *me*, rather than my title or position."

She studied him for a very long time. "I *do* like you. I mean, I did—"

"Until you discovered I was a peer."

"*No*, until I realized you were pretending to be something you are not." She sighed. "I *do* care about honesty. I *don't* care about your title, Benjamin."

"But that's who I am. That is *all* I am."

"Whoever told you that?" Henrietta asked.

He straightened his spine. "No one needed to tell me my duty to my family. As the eldest son of an earl, my path was set from the day I was born."

"That is terribly sad."

For the first time in his life he found himself agreeing with the unthinkable. "Yes, it is rather pitiful, isn't it?"

"You could be far more than that."

"Does that mean I am forgivable?" He held his breath.

"Of *course* you are forgivable," Henrietta said.

"Then you accept my apology?"

"Yes."

He reached for her hand, and she didn't pull away as he kissed her fingers.

“Thank you.”

She gently disengaged herself from his grasp and curtsied, her smile so sweet it hurt to look at her. He had a terrible sensation that his world was about to end.

“Goodbye, Benjamin. It was a pleasure knowing you.”

He grabbed hold of her wrist. “Don’t say that. Don’t—”

“You need to go and make yourself known to your hosts,” she said firmly but kindly. “I will make sure that Robert is well taken care of in the kitchens. I look forward to seeing you in your wedding finery.”

She was leaving him, and he didn’t know how to stop her, didn’t have the vocabulary or experience necessary to counteract her calm logic.

“I don’t want it to end like this.”

“What to end?” she countered. “We shared a kiss.”

He glared at her. “It was far more than that to me.”

She looked away from him, tears glinting in her eyes. “This place—this moment we shared—isn’t real. You *know* that. You remarked upon the absurdity of it yourself. When you leave here, you will wonder what on earth you were thinking about.”

“When I leave here, I’ll go back to being the stuffy eldest son of an earl,” Benjamin said bitterly. “And what about you?”

“I’ll take up my new position as a governess in Hertfordshire.”

He stepped so close she had to raise her chin to look at him. “And that’s *enough* for you?”

“At least I’ll be safe,” she retorted, her cheeks flushing at his accusative tone.

“Safe.” He shook his head. “That’s all you require? You’ll be bored in five minutes!”

“Which has nothing to do with you!”

“You’re right. It doesn’t, because you are too cowardly to even contemplate a future with me in it!”

Her hands went to her hips. “How dare you sit in judgment on me when you pretended to be *your own valet!*”

“Oh, we’re back to that are we?” he jeered. “I thought you’d forgiven me.”

“You are impossible!” She shoved him hard in the chest. “Go away, you horrible, *infuriating* man.”

He took hold of her by the shoulders and crushed her mouth against his until she was kissing him, her nails digging into the nape

of his neck.

When he finally drew back, he was panting. “Tell me that means nothing to you. Tell me you won’t even give me a *chance*.”

She pressed her trembling fingers against his mouth. “Goodbye, Benjamin.”

He let her untangle herself from his arms and walk away before falling to his knees in despair. What in God’s name had gotten into him? He was *never* loud or impatient, and he always kept his temper. What had Castle Keyvnor unleashed in him, and how would he turn back into the man he needed to be? Did he even *want* to be that shell of a man anymore?

“What the devil are you doing down there, coz?”

Benjamin’s defeated gaze fixed on the highly polished top boots of his cousin Michael, and he wearily got to his feet.

“Nothing important. Just mourning the loss of all my future hopes and dreams.”

Michael’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you drunk, Saxelby?”

“No.” Benjamin gave Michael a savage smile. “But I fear my heart might be broken in two.”

Chapter 4

Henrietta snatched a drink of ale from the jug on the kitchen table and considered the tasks she still had to accomplish. The weddings had gone off beautifully in the Great Hall, and now the guests were gathering for the Yule Ball. She hadn't stopped working long enough to think about Benjamin and his deception, and yet it sat in her stomach like an indigestible sour plum.

She pictured his expression as he'd argued with her, sometimes angry, sometimes so passionate and vulnerable that she'd wanted to throw caution to the winds and just agree to anything he suggested. But he was the son and heir of an *earl*. He had no place in his life for her, and she… She was to become a respectable governess with a stable home—something she'd dreamed about since she was a little girl.

Oblivious to the noise and clatter as Cook barked orders and prepared a late supper for the ball, Henrietta clasped the mug of ale to her bosom. She'd watched Benjamin at the wedding, looking quite unlike himself in a dark coat and gleaming white shirt and cravat. He hadn't looked passionate at all, just as miserable as she currently felt. He'd stood between a younger man who slightly resembled him and a married couple, his face stony.

She remembered him in the dovecote laughing down at her, his auburn hair mussed and pigeon feathers stuck in his ears. Would he ever look like that again? She marveled at her own conceit. Of course he would. He'd find a woman of his own class, marry her, and be happy forever after. The fact that the mere *thought* of him looking at another woman made her fingers curl into claws was neither helpful, nor relevant.

One of them had to be sensible. She would not allow herself to acknowledge that she had come to care for him so quickly and so deeply. It was folly. She'd never be anyone's dupe again.

"Henrietta!" She jumped as Mrs. Bray approached her, looking rather frazzled. "Go upstairs and make sure that everything is ready

in the ladies' retiring room. Your main duty tonight will be to assist the ladies."

"Yes, Mrs. Bray."

She was more than happy to take on a job that would not only keep her busy, but also prevent any of the servants, particularly Mr. Drake, from asking her how Benjamin the valet had suddenly become his own employer. Not that anyone had apparently noticed on either side of the divide. It was quite startling how unobservant they all were.

As she reached the main level of the castle, the musicians struck an opening chord, and she smiled, imagining the couples dancing to the intricate music. She'd never been to a ball and suspected that now she never would. Governesses weren't invited to such things.

She paused, her hand on the door latch. Benjamin was right. She would be bored.

But he hadn't experienced life as she had—living hand to mouth when her father ran out of funds, being chased by his creditors, being used to beg for more time to pay because her father joked that she would melt the hardest of hearts. She *wanted* to be safe. What was wrong with that?

For the next hour, she was kept busy helping various ladies pin up their hair and mend their hems. Some of the locals remembered her from when she was a child and were pleased to see her again. They were all very grateful for her efforts and for those of the rest of the staff at Keyvnor. When the musicians took a well-deserved break, she took them their supper, and then stepped outside to view the lights and escape the heated, over-perfumed atmosphere.

Her breath condensed in the cold, and she wished she'd brought her shawl out with her. She glanced down at her sensible black gown and wished it was made of silk, or chiffon and lace, and fit for a ball...

"All alone, my dear?"

She turned to see the Earl of Hayfield leering at her from the doorway. He was smoking a cigarillo and had a glass of brandy in his hand. His breath smelled as if he'd had enough brandy for the entire wedding party.

"Actually, I'm just about to go back inside." Henrietta smiled politely. "It is rather cold out here."

"There's no need to rush off, little pigeon." His gaze traveled over her in a way that put her in mind of a farmer at a cattle

market. “I wanted to speak to you about a little proposition of mine.”

“I can’t think of anything you want that could concern me, sir.”

“A financial proposition. I’m in need of a mistress.”

Oh God, she was tired of this, of him, and of the whole upper class and their overwhelming arrogance.

“Then I wish you well in finding one. Good night, sir.” She attempted to push past him, but he grabbed her wrist in a painful grip.

“Don’t walk away when I’m talking to you, girl.”

“Let go of me,” she snarled. “Or I will not be responsible for what I do to you.”

“Yes, let her go.” Henrietta froze as Benjamin spoke from behind her. “Or I’ll help her mete out whatever punishment for your presumption she deems necessary.”

The earl took a step back and collided with the doorframe. “Saxelby. I didn’t see you there. No need to fret, old boy. This woman and I are friends, aren’t we dear?”

“No, we are not.” Henrietta jerked her wrist free. “You are a disgusting old rake.”

“Do you really wish to cause a scene, Hayfield?” Benjamin drawled. “One would hate to have to ask the Earl of Banfield to eject you from the castle in disgrace.”

Hayfield gave Benjamin a curt bow and ignored Henrietta. “As you wish, my lord.”

“And season’s greetings to you, too,” Benjamin called after him as the earl scuttled away.

He turned to Henrietta, his brow creased. “Did he hurt you?”

“No, you arrived just in time.” She tried to smile and failed miserably.

He came immediately to her side and took her hand. “You are shaking. Do you want me to plant him a facer or call him out?”

“And ruin the festivities? My grandmother would disown me.” She shuddered. “No, thank you. I appreciate the offer, though.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. “As you wish.”

She stared at his perfectly tied cravat, unwilling to risk looking up because she was simply too vulnerable to force herself to walk away from him right now.

“Will you dance with me?”

"*What*?" Henrietta had to raise her startled gaze to his.

"Will you dance with me?" Benjamin asked again. "I've danced with several delightful ladies tonight, but all I could think about was you."

"I'm not dressed for dancing, and there's no music." Henrietta objected even as her heart leaped at the very idea.

"You are always so practical." He paused. "Can you not imagine, then? Can you allow the magic of Castle Keyvnor to enfold us for one last time?"

"Why? I was horrible to you." Her voice cracked. "I sent you away."

"I know you did, and I deserved it." His smile was like the sweetest balm to her bruised heart. "But here I am, wanting to dance with you, wanting to share this Christmas Eve moment with you. So what will you do?"

"You're not playing fair." She sniffed.

"Why should I?" He had the audacity to chuckle. "What do I have to lose?"

"Your reputation?"

"By dancing with you? I don't think so." He took her other hand and placed it on his shoulder. "Come on."

She knew the steps of all the dances because she'd learned them at school, but she'd never actually performed them with a man. She allowed her fingers to rest on the shoulder of his extremely well-cut coat, as he encircled her waist with his arm.

Out of nowhere the sound of a lute emerged, playing a remarkably modern version of a minuet. Henrietta looked up to see Benedict sitting atop the parapet wall, strumming away and smiling encouragingly down at her.

With a sigh, she accepted the inevitable and allowed Benjamin to lead her into the dance. They fitted together perfectly, his lean strength the ideal balance for her softer curves. She wanted to weep, she wanted to sing, and she wanted the moment never to end.

"Henrietta…"

Benjamin looked down at her, his soul in his eyes, and she stood on tiptoe to kiss him. If this was their magic moment, mayhap she should make the most of it. His mouth opened to her, and then she simply allowed her emotions to do her talking as they explored each other until she suddenly knew what she wanted.

It was a magical night. It was her *last* night with Benjamin before he returned to being a peer, and she became a respectable governess.

She cupped Benjamin's chin. "Will you come to bed with me?"

His eyes widened. "I beg your pardon?"

"I know it is extremely forward of me to be offering myself to you like this, but—"

The rest of her explanation was swallowed in his kiss.

Eventually, she pulled away and made him look at her. "You must promise that we share this one night only with no regret on either side on the morrow."

"If I must." He kissed her again.

Eventually, she took his hand, and they climbed the stairs to the servants' quarters together. It was quiet up there. All the staff was currently engaged in helping with the ball or serving the supper. Even though she thought they would not be disturbed, she locked the door behind them.

Benjamin turned a slow circle, looking from her bed to the wooden pegs where she had hung her other gown, petticoat, and cloak.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked softly.

In answer, she started unpinning her bodice, and he rushed to her side, burying his hands in her hair to remove the pins that held it in place.

"I've imagined doing this so many times," he whispered. "Taking down your hair, wrapping my fist in it, and keeping you close…"

Henrietta shivered at the promise in his words as she let her gown fall to the floor, revealing her plain stays, shift, and petticoat. He was probably used to silk and satin, but she had none of those things to tempt him with. Not that he seemed to need them.

"May I help you?" Benjamin asked.

She turned her back to him, removed her petticoat, and allowed him to unlace her stays. Her breathing was so ragged she thought she might faint. His fingertips grazed her shoulder, and he bent to kiss her throat.

"You are so beautiful. I cannot believe I am here with you and not still stuck in my dreams."

She wanted to remind him that it still was a dream, but something held her back. With his living, breathing presence behind her, how could she pretend he wasn't real—that what they were

about to do together would not remain seared in her memory forever?

"Help me," Benjamin commanded.

She turned to face him, one eyebrow raised. "You managed without your valet for three days. Have you already forgotten how to undress yourself?"

"No, but I'd much rather you did it." He sighed as she reached for his intricately tied cravat. "Robert, efficient as he is, doesn't have quite the same effect on me."

It didn't take long for her to reduce him to just his shirt, which he tore off over his head, leaving him naked and hard and so perfectly beautiful that Henrietta could only stare at him. She reached out and traced the passage from his sternum down to the flatness of his stomach with her fingertip.

He shuddered and brought her into his arms. "Don't go any lower or I'll disgrace myself."

His cock pressed against her shift, making it damp as he kissed her with a lavish thoroughness that made her moan and rub herself against him like a cat. She should have known he would take his responsibilities very seriously. His hand inched under her shift to clasp her bottom, lifting her into him and making her want…

"Let's lie down before I fall," he murmured against her lips. "I'd rather not resort to the desperate tactics of backing you up against the nearest wall and having my way with you."

She nipped his ear. "Maybe we can try that later."

He groaned and followed her down onto the narrow bed, straddling her hips as he removed her shift. His gaze fastened on her breasts, and he licked his lips.

"Dear God…"

A second later his mouth was on her, tasting her hard nipple and the softness of her flesh while she writhed beneath him. His hand skimmed her hip and then cupped her between the legs.

"You're wet for me."

Henrietta smiled and rocked her hips against the palm of his questing hand. His thumb found her bud, and he toyed with her, his fingers easily gaining entry inside her, moving in a rhythm as old as time. She closed her eyes as pleasure overwhelmed her in such sharp, bright colors that she climaxed immediately.

He went still, his heart pounding against her chest, his hot, throbbing cock pressed to her stomach.

“I want to be inside you.” He met her gaze, his hand lingering, learning her, inciting her passion with every touch. “I promise I will not…come inside you, but—l must—”

She touched his swollen, well-kissed mouth with her fingertips. “You will not make me pregnant even if you do come inside me. I’m due to bleed in the next day or so.”

“What difference does that make?”

He frowned down at her, and she almost laughed. He was naked, aroused, and braced over her body. But even in the throes of passion he wanted to know all the particulars before he proceeded.

“Remember, I lived with an army. Most of the women who followed the drum didn’t want to conceive children in that uncertain environment. They talked about such things, and I *listened.”*

#

Benjamin studied Henrietta for a long moment, and then took her hand and wrapped it firmly around the base of his shaft. She would not deceive him. He would wager his soul on that. His ability to construct another rational thought crumbled as she slid her fingers up and down his cock, making his hips rock into the rhythm she demanded. He hastily removed her hand.

“No, or I’ll not last another minute.”

She laughed up at him, and he found himself smiling back. He’d never had sex with a woman he regarded as a cross between a goddess and an equal before. All his other encounters had been of a more transactional nature. This was the most thrilling and freeing event of his life. Her frank appreciation of his body, and her willingness to allow him to plunder hers, was remarkable.

He eased her thighs apart with his knees and lightly grazed his knuckles over her golden mound and the delightful swollen bud beneath. She closed her eyes and writhed against the sheet, making him stare in awe at the fact that he was doing this to her. Baron Saxelby, heir to the Earl of Widcome.

“Benjamin…”

Her softly spoken plea made him pause. No, this wasn’t Saxelby. This was *Benjamin* making love for the first time in his life.

He eased down over her glorious, lush body, one hand guiding his cock deep as he thrust forward and was taken in, and…Gods. He

had to close his eyes in case he wept with the sheer pleasure of it. Henrietta had let him inside her, and he felt as if he'd come home.

Her hands came to rest on his shoulders, and she raised her hips, allowing him to sink even deeper and align their bodies in perfect harmony. He had to move now, had to see if the pleasure stayed or increased ten-thousand fold. Her gasp as he rocked back and dove in again shuddered through his body. He wanted to give her everything—wanted to make her scream his name and never ever forget him.

Her nails raked his back, and her heel crept up the back of his thigh to his arse, holding him locked against her. It was heaven and hell, and he had to come, *had to*…

With one last anguished cry, Benjamin climaxed so hard he bit his lip and tasted blood. Just as he thought he might regain his senses, Henrietta came too, and his whole world disintegrated into a mindless sensation of pure need as his cock was squeezed and pummeled within the tight grip of her channel.

He stayed braced over her, waiting for his heart to slow down, aware that she was wrapped around him and that he never wanted to let her go again. He didn't want to think about that. Didn't want reality interfering with their magical night just yet. With a groan, he managed to roll away and almost ended up on the floor.

#

Henrietta slowly opened her eyes, and stared up at the angled ceiling. She wanted to pull Benjamin's body back over hers so they could stay joined together and forget everything. She'd been given a blessing. Lying with Benjamin had changed her, *freed* her from the past and the awkward fumblings of a marriage gone rotten from the start. She'd begun to believe she would never experience passion, but Benjamin had shown her otherwise. Who would have thought he concealed such depths?

She eased over onto her side and dragged Benjamin back from the edge of the narrow bed to face her. She could hear the echoes of the Yule Ball down below, music and laughter and the faint howl of the ever-present wind prowling the castle halls. None of that mattered. She traced his fine features, the curve of his mouth and the aquiline bridge of his nose.

"Thank you."

He raised an eyebrow. “I was about to say the same thing.” He paused. “Unless, you mean you want me to leave?”

“Not unless you have to get back to the ball, or your family.”

“I doubt they will miss me.” His smile was wry. “They didn’t notice when I disappeared for two whole days, so a few hours more won’t matter.”

“The servants *have* been asking about you, but no one has noticed you are still here.” She stroked an errant strand of auburn hair away from his cheek. She couldn’t seem to stop touching him. “People are very unobservant sometimes.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more. From now on, I will be paying attention to the people who serve me, and I will appreciate their efforts.”

“Until you become used to them again, and they fade into the background.”

He studied her face. “I’ll never forget you.”

“Or I, you.” She leaned in to kiss him just as he did the same thing. Their mouths met and clung until he rolled her beneath him again and loved her until she forgot everything but the scent, taste, and feel of him.

One magical night. One man who had restored her faith in all men and made her feel desirable again. She’d never forget him.

How could she?

#

A door slammed somewhere along the corridor, and Benjamin woke up with a start. It only took him a second to remember that he had Henrietta wrapped in his arms and was in her bed in the attics of Castle Keyvnor. She sighed and nestled closer, her glorious hair draped over his chest like a warrior’s cloak.

He didn’t want to get up. He didn’t want to go down those stairs and be the stiff and formal Saxelby again. Henrietta liked *Benjamin*, and that was the most precious Christmas gift he’d ever received.

There was a scratching sound, and Benjamin switched his besotted gaze from Henrietta to where her clothing was hung on a row of pegs on the wall. A letter fell out of her apron pocket and floated gently down to the floor right next to him by the bed.

Benjamin was fairly certain that no draft had blown the letter to him and searched hard for any sight of Benedict Nankervis. He

heard the ghost of a laugh, and then nothing more. Trying not to awaken Henrietta, he reached out and picked up the familiar letter that had a London address scrawled in one corner. The seal was unbroken.

"What are you doing?" Henrietta murmured sleepily.

"I'm not sure."

"That's my letter." She opened one eye and eased herself off his chest. "Where did you get that?"

"It floated out of your apron pocket practically into my hand." He offered it to her. "Why haven't you opened it?"

She sat up, her hair falling over her breasts, and yawned, which made his morning cockstand spring to attention. "I put it in my pocket and forgot about it."

"Then perhaps you should open it now."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "You are remarkably annoying in the morning."

"Seeing as your ghostly friend delivered the letter to me personally, I feel somewhat obliged to make sure you read it."

She peered at the address and broke the seal with obvious reluctance. "It's from the solicitor in London."

"What solicitor?" Benjamin asked.

"It has something to do with my father's estate—or lack of it. I never met his family, and my mother was an only child, so I suppose I am the only person left to take care of his affairs." She grimaced. "I am almost afraid to find out what it says."

"Would you like me to read it for you?"

She patted his arm. "That's very sweet of you, Benjamin, but it hardly merits your time or your attention."

He bit back his first reply that anything that disturbed her demanded his attention and, feeling curiously hurt, gestured to the door.

"Would you prefer it if I left you to read the letter in peace?"

She glanced up at him, the unfolded letter still in her hand. "Now I have offended you, and you're back to being top-lofty again."

"I am only trying to be practical," he pointed out as calmly as he could, suddenly aware of his nakedness, and the scent of their lovemaking all around him. She'd offered him one precious night, not the rest of her life. He'd promised to abide by that decision. He tried to match her practical tone.

“I *am* in your bed, and I’m fairly certain you wouldn’t wish Mrs. Bray to catch me here.”

She put the letter on the pillow and touched his cheek. “I’ll never forget this night, Benjamin. You…” She swallowed hard. “It’s hard to let you go, but I promised myself I wouldn’t regret a thing, and I won’t.”

“You don’t have to let me go.” He heard himself speaking before he even realized he had something to say. “We could—”

“No, we couldn’t. I don’t want to be any man’s mistress, and you are too far above me socially to allow anything else.” She got out of bed and started hunting for her clothes, throwing his on the bed.

He gripped the sheet tightly between his fingers. “Who says so?”

She sighed. “Benjamin, your family are obviously very important to you, and you consider it your duty to maintain your good name.”

“Yes, that’s true, but what if I wanted to *marry* you—”

She grabbed a washcloth, and vigorously began to wash her body, removing his scent, his possession of her, even as he watched. “I don’t want to be the reason you become alienated from your family. My father lost his family when he married my mother, and I don’t think he ever came to terms with that rejection.”

“But he loved your mother.”

She paused as she struggled into a clean shift. “Yes, he did, but he lost everything because of that choice. He was no longer invited to events he had long considered his birthright. He was ignored by friends and barred from his club.” She swung around, and he realized she was close to tears. “I cannot do that to you.”

“You still think that’s all I care about.” He didn’t even bother to make it a question. He pulled his shirt over his head and stepped into his underclothes and pantaloons, his movements jerky as he struggled to control his thoughts.

“No, but you should care. If you don’t consider these things, you might make a terrible mistake.” She came toward him and turned her back so he could help her with her stays. “We had a wonderful night together. Can you not be satisfied with that?”

He laced her corset tight and tied the bow with shaking fingers. Every layer of clothing she added put her further away from him. Every goddamned reasonable word she uttered did exactly the same thing.

He spun her around to face him. “And what if I think through all these matters very carefully indeed, and I still want you?”

She studied him for so long that he almost forgot how to breathe.

"Then I suppose you might find me and tell me so."

"I won't know where you are." As usual, his dogged determination to set things straight between them warred with his eminently practical nature.

Her smile was a mixture of sweetness and fear that almost felled him to his knees. "You'll find me if you really want to." She went on tiptoe to kiss his mouth. "Now you should go back to your own room and behave yourself."

"I intend to." He kissed her back. "May I speak freely to you if I see you around the castle today?"

"Yes—as long as you don't take me in your arms and kiss me."

So it was to be like that between them again—friendly banter and nothing else.

"I believe if I catch you under the mistletoe, kissing you would be considered quite in order." He took an unsteady step away from her. "Thank you for last night."

"It was truly magical." Her smile wobbled. "I will never forget you, Benjamin."

He bowed low, put on his coat and shoes, and tiptoed out of the room and down the backstairs to the floor below. There was no one around yet. Even the kitchens were quiet.

Benjamin let himself into his room and sank down on the side of the bed. Henrietta was not immune to him. She was simply allowing her father's past to color her future. He took a deep, shuddering breath. He needed to think things through and weigh the odds. His heart told him this was his last chance to change the course of his current existence and make things right. Henrietta might have won this round, but she obviously had no idea how determined the newly awakened Benjamin could be.

He lifted his head and stared out of the window at the dark sea beyond. For the first time in his life, he was going to do what was best for *him,* and the rest of his family could go hang themselves.

Chapter 5

Henrietta waited until the door closed behind Benjamin, and sank down onto the bed, hands pressed to her eyes. She allowed herself to dissolve into a storm of unhelpful weeping. She'd managed to send him away even though her heart was breaking, and he'd let her… He'd kept his promise even though the look in his eyes when he'd left had almost shredded her resolve.

After taking several deep, shuddering breaths, she managed to compose herself sufficiently to attempt to make the bed, which only served to remind her of the night she'd just shared with Benjamin. The letter flew up from the pillow and smacked her on the nose.

"Stop it," Henrietta warned whichever castle spirit was demanding her attention. "I'll read it right now."

She broke the seal and sat on the side of the bed where the dawn light was now streaming through her window.

Dear Miss Febland,

Thank you for your recent letter. I appreciate your concern about the expense of a trip to London, but I assure you that your travels will not be in vain. I am honored to inform you that your recently deceased father, the Honorable Jonathan Febland-Mortimer, second son of the Earl of Febland was the beneficiary of several significant financial legacies from members of the Febland and Mortimer families. The family has been notified of your existence, and is looking forward to meeting you at my premises when you arrive in London.

Please let me know your travel arrangements, and whether you require accommodation in London. My wife and I would be honored to have you as our guest.

Yours sincerely.

Alfred Pilcher. Esq.

Henrietta read the letter through again and slowly closed her mouth. What on *earth* was going on? Her black sheep of a father

had been the son of an *earl*? He'd left her money?

She slowly shook her head and carefully folded the letter back up. If Mr. Pilcher was correct, she might have enough to live on without having to work for a living ever again. The idea was almost too overwhelming to accept. She hurried to pull on her woolen stockings and brush her hair into a respectable bun.

If she was lucky, she might be able to speak to Benjamin before his valet went to help him dress.

Benjamin was too restless to wait for his valet to arrive. He dressed in his warmest clothes and was halfway down the backstairs before he remembered he was supposed to be one of the guests now and wouldn't be welcome in the kitchens. He reversed course and passed through the empty Great Hall where the remnants of the Yule log smoldered in the huge fireplace and the scent of Christmas spices from the punch perfumed the air.

He needed to write to his parents, but first he'd have to go to Hollybrook Park and speak to his sister Cassy. She might be the only member of his family who would understand why he wanted to marry a woman who wasn't from his class whose grandmother was the castle housekeeper. Even if she didn't understand why, she would probably support his decision.

"Benjamin! I mean, Lord Saxelby—wait!"

He looked over his shoulder to see Henrietta running toward him and swung around to face her.

"What's wrong?"

It took him a moment to notice she was smiling and had something in her hand.

"I finally read my letter. My father was the son of an earl, and he left me an inheritance!"

Benjamin blinked at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"The solicitor said that my father's family want to meet me in London." She paused to study him, her smile dimming. "Why aren't you happy about this?"

"Did you think this would make you more acceptable in my eyes?" He was surprised at how calm he sounded considering he wanted to punch his fist through the wall. "Was it impossible for you to believe that I might love you just for *yourself*?"

"I wasn't thinking about that *at all*! I was merely delighted that I

might have enough to live on without having to take up that position as a governess. I was going to ask your advice as to what I should do next!"

They stared at each other, both breathing hard for a long moment before she half-turned away. "I thought you would be pleased for me."

"I *am* pleased, it's just that none of that matters to me."

Her hands fisted at her sides. "It doesn't matter that I might have some money of my own and a family who want to acknowledge me? I have *never* had those things that you take so easily for granted. Can you not understand that it might matter to *me* and be pleased?"

An icy finger pressed against Benjamin's lips, and he fought a shudder as an unseen being whispered in his ear. "*Speak wisely, my friend, or thou wilt lose the fair maiden*."

The ghost was right. Benjamin needed to slow down before he said something that would destroy the fragile hopes he couldn't bear to extinguish. Was he arguing simply because *he* wanted to be the hero of the story and rescue his very own Cinderella? Perhaps she didn't need rescuing after all. Hadn't he learned *anything*?

For the first time since he'd met Henrietta, he needed to be rational Saxelby instead of passionate Benjamin. There was too much at stake to ruin everything now.

"May I see the letter?"

She handed it over without comment, and he read it through.

"Oh, dear God, *no*." All thoughts of being rational abruptly deserted him. Benjamin breathed out through his nose, and read it again. "This can't be possible."

"What is it?" Henrietta asked.

He raised his horrified gaze to meet hers. "You're a Febland-Mortimer."

Henrietta wrinkled her nose. "Am I?"

"Deidre Febland-Mortimer is one of my mother's closest friends."

"Is she nice?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" Benjamin asked hollowly.

"If she is some kind of connection of mine, I might appreciate the insight."

"She's… formidable." He slowly exhaled. "Rather like you now that I think about it."

“Will l like her?”

“If she and the rest of the family have decided to acknowledge you, I can guarantee she will support you through thick and thin.” Benjamin paused. “She’ll want to take you under her wing and bring you out in society, and—”

Henrietta cleared her throat. “I think you are getting rather ahead of yourself, my lord.”

“I know what that family are like,” Benjamin insisted. “You won’t have much choice in the matter.”

“There are always choices, my lord.”

He took her hand in his. “My name is Benjamin.”

“And we are in public!” She looked around nervously and tried to pull away.

“I had already decided I wanted to marry you before you came out with all this, you know,” Benjamin said. “I was going to speak to my sister and write to my parents before I asked you formally, but my mind was already made up.”

She went still and looked up into his eyes. For the first time ever she seemed bereft of speech, so he plowed on. He might as well make a complete fool of himself and get it over with.

“I fell in love with you the moment I saw you standing at the kitchen door. I don’t give a damn whether anyone thinks that is ridiculous, because it is the truth.” He cupped her chin, his thumb tracing her jawline. “And, having gotten to know you over the past few days, my feelings have only grown. You are no longer just a goddess, but the woman I wish to spend the rest of my life with. I admire your courage, your honesty, and your ability to laugh at life. I hope those qualities of yours will rub off on me and make me less of an unemotional stick-in-the-mud.”

Her choke of laughter warmed his soul. “Are you quite *sure*, Benjamin?”

“I’d be surer if you told me how you feel in return.” He mock-frowned at her.

It was her turn to sigh. “I cannot imagine not seeing you again, hearing you laugh, or being thoroughly kissed by you.” She pressed a hand to her bosom. “Giving you up, and doing the right thing, made my heart *ache*. Is that love?” She gazed up at him searchingly. “I have never been in love before.”

“Neither have I, but I know this is real and true.” He kissed her. “If you do decide to throw your lot in with the Febland-Mortimers, I

will at least be able to court your properly."

"*Court* me?"

He smiled down at her. "Indeed. I will take you driving in the park, fill up your dance card at balls to scandalize the dowagers, and kiss you soundly every time I get the opportunity."

"I have always wanted to dance at a ball…" Henrietta whispered. "I still cannot believe this is happening. It feels like a dream."

He smiled down at her. "You told me Castle Keyvnor was magical. Why are you surprised? By the way, if you are indeed a Febland-Mortimer heiress, you could probably marry a duke, you know."

"Why would I do that when I have you?" Henrietta murmured.

Benjamin kissed her again, glad that she was obviously as besotted with him as he was with her.

"Henrietta!"

"Benjamin!"

They both jumped apart as Mrs. Bray and Mr. Drake bore down upon them from opposite sides of the room, but with identical expressions of horror.

"What on earth are you doing canoodling in the Great Hall on Christmas morning?" Mrs. Bray got in first.

"And where have you been the last day or so, Benjamin?" Mr. Drake demanded.

"Mr. Drake, you are mistaken. That's Lord Saxelby." Mrs. Bray gasped as Benjamin took Henrietta's hand in his.

"No, it's—" Mr. Drake's jaw went slack. "I do beg your pardon, my lord. You look remarkably like one of our staff members. I do apologize."

"It doesn't matter who he is, Mr. Drake," Mrs. Bray interrupted him. "He should have more sense than to be kissing my granddaughter in broad daylight. What will people *think* of her?"

Benjamin bowed to the housekeeper and the steward. "I do beg your pardon for kissing Miss Henrietta in public, Mrs. Bray." He turned to Henrietta, who was struggling not to laugh, kissed her hand, and winked at her.

"I look forward to furthering my acquaintance with you in London, Miss Febland-Mortimer. It's been a pleasure."

"Thank you, sir." She offered him a mischievous smile. "I believe you have the means to find me now if you so desire."

“I do, indeed. Merry Christmas, ma’am.”

Benjamin nodded at them all and walked toward the dining room. Even if Henrietta chose not to stay with the Febland-Mortimer family and decided to make her own way, he now knew how to find her. He was quite certain of that. Henrietta loved him and they would one day be together. He knew that in his soul.

In the empty dining room, the fragrant smell of coffee and fried bacon drew him to the covered silver dishes on the sideboard. He also helped himself to a large slice of pigeon pie. It might be Christmas day and partridges might be more in keeping, but from now on, he’d always have a fondness for pigeons…

Pigeons in a Hole

Pick, draw, and wash four young pigeons, stick their legs into their belly as you do boiled pigeons. Season them with pepper, salt, and beaten mace, put into the belly of every pigeon a lump of butter the size of a walnut. Lay your pigeons in a pie dish, pour over them a batter made of three eggs, two spoonfuls of flour and a half a pint of good milk. Bake in a moderate oven and serve them to table in the same dish.”

—*The Experienced English Housekeeper*, Elizabeth Raffald, 1769

I hope you enjoyed reading *And a Pigeon in a Pear Tree* as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you want to know when my next book comes out, please join my mailing list.

Best
Kate

About Kate

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Kate Pearce was born in England in the middle of a large family of girls and quickly found that her imagination was far more interesting than real life. After acquiring a degree in history and barely escaping from the British Civil Service alive, she moved to California and then to Hawaii with her kids and her husband and set about reinventing herself as a romance writer.

She is known for both her unconventional heroes and her joy at subverting romance clichés. In her spare time she self publishes science fiction erotic romance, historical romance, and whatever else she can imagine.

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